



When political talk translates into political action: The role of personality traits[☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 12 May 2015

Received in revised form 30 October 2015

Accepted 2 December 2015

Available online 12 December 2015

Keywords:

Political talk

Personality traits

Political participation

Social influence

Longitudinal design

ABSTRACT

Discussing politics in everyday life is quite common but it is not clear how talking politics should prompt the desire to become politically active. We compared two ideas: information gain, i.e., political talk translates into action when people receive information about activities and organizations; and social influence, i.e., political talk translates into action when people perceive their friends as politically active. Our main goal was to address the role played by two personality traits – Openness to Experience and Agreeableness – within these processes. Adopting a longitudinal design ($N = 895$, sample of youths surveyed twice), we found that political talk promotes political participation over time when people perceive their discussion partners as politically active and that this effect is especially pronounced for agreeable people. Findings from this study provided support to the idea that political talk translates into political action under the condition of social influence and for people who are particularly susceptible to social conformity.

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1. Introduction

The notion that human behavior is the outcome of both individual dispositions and situations has a long history in personality and social psychology (Lewin, 1939). However, only recently the interaction between personality and environmental factors has been used to explain political behaviors. Mondak, Hibbing, Canache, Seligson, and Anderson (2010) proposed an integrative framework stressing the heuristic value of acknowledging person–situation interactions in the study of personality effects on political behaviors. That is, just as the expression of personality effects might depend on the situation, the effects of environmental or situational circumstances on political behaviors might be contingent upon personality traits. In sum, the authors advocate for a careful consideration of processes detailed in terms of how, why, and in what conditions personality traits and situational factors are expected to affect political behavior (Mondak et al., 2010).

We relied on this framework to study the still unclear effects of interpersonal discussion about politics on political engagement. Empirical research has shown that the effects of political talk extend to a broad spectrum of participatory actions (e.g. Eveland & Hively, 2009; Klofstad, 2011); and this seems to be especially true when people are engaged in informal political conversation with their peers (Klofstad, 2007, 2011). The extensive efforts made to identify the features of political talk that can boost political participation (e.g., the degree of disagreement with discussion partners, see for example Mutz, 2002) have been rarely complemented by the study

of individual characteristics of the discussants. In a few cases researchers investigated the role played by discussants' political attributes, such as individual predisposition to participate in politics (Klofstad, 2009), or socio-demographic characteristics (McClurg, 2003), but personality predispositions have been largely neglected.

In this study we addressed the moderating role played by personality traits on the effects of political talk on political participation. In a review of the literature on this topic, Schmitt-Beck and Lup (2013) suggested two explanations as to why everyday political talk is likely to translate into political action. The first one is related to the gain of relevant political information during interpersonal discussions, whereas the second one refers to a process of social influence. Given that to date “findings are thus inconclusive as to which of the two mechanisms is more important with regard to participation” (Schmitt-Beck & Lup, 2013, p. 526), we compared these two ideas with a focus on personality traits: *Who* is more likely to be receptive to political conversations?

1.1. Information gaining

Information gain refers to the fact that during political talk people are provided with low-cost politically relevant information that can easily be used to direct political actions, either in terms of electoral behaviors or of involvement in political activities. People may be exposed to a variety of political information, such as virtues and vices of the candidates running in the elections and their stands on political issues, or about political events that are about to take place. In light of the traditional view of political participation as being determined by the tradeoff between costs and benefits (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995), information gain during everyday political talk should considerably decrease

[☆] This article is a Special issue article – “Young researcher award 2015”.

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the costs related to the process of information gathering and, accordingly, increase the likelihood of participation (Klofstad, 2011). Moreover, given that individual resources (time, cognitive ability) are limited, receiving information in everyday political talk provides an opportunity to gain political information investing minimal efforts (McClurg, 2003). This idea is further supported by empirical findings showing that political talk is more influential when discussants are politically expert (e.g., Klofstad, 2011), indirectly indicating that people consider expert peers as important sources of political information.

If this explanation accounts for the effects of political talk on political engagement – i.e., political talk translates into action when people receive politically-relevant information – people open to new ideas should be especially susceptible to political conversation with peers. Indeed, individuals scoring high in Openness show intellectual curiosity, a wide range of cultural interests, appreciate novelty and new ideas (John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008), and are more receptive to new information (Heinström, 2003). The importance of this personality trait in shaping the responses to political information has been additionally supported by Gerber, Huber, Doherty, Dowling, and Panagopoulos (2013), who showed that people open to new experiences are broadly persuaded by political appeals, such as voter mobilization messages. Similarly, Hibbing, Ritchie, and Anderson (2011) found that discussion partners' political views affected respondents' approval of George Bush only for people scoring high in Openness to Experience. Therefore, according to this view, we expected political talk to enhance political participation only when during such conversations people receive information related to political activities (information gain). This effect should be especially pronounced for people high in Openness to Experience (Hp1).

1.2. Social influence

The second explanation is related to social influence. According to this idea the effects of political talk are not driven by the content of the conversation itself, but rather by the influence exerted by the social context. In this case, people's desire to conform to social norms plays a central role in explaining reactions to political conversations. Normative social influence can be driven by the mere presence of others or by the perception of their preferences; it is prompt by the desire to be accepted by others and to receive their approval, and drives conformity to the group's beliefs and behaviors (Shepherd, Lane, Tapscott, & Gentile, 2011). Normative social influence should be especially important when considering the effects of political talk with peers among youth. During adolescence and early adulthood the adherence to social norms – which are mainly founded on the perception of valued others' behaviors (Brehwald & Prinstein, 2011) – within one's own reference group is a central mechanism accounting for peers influence. Turning back to the classical view on the costs–benefits tradeoff, normative conformity should heighten the benefits associated with participation, in that political actions would represent a way to feel part of one's own social group and get respect of others. Empirical findings showing that intimacy in interpersonal relationship is a fundamental characteristic accounting for the efficacy of political talk in promoting participation and/or political thought indirectly support this view (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1991; Klofstad, 2007).

If this explanation accounts for the effects of political talk on political engagement – i.e., political talk translates into action when people perceive their discussion partners as politically active – agreeable people should be particularly affected by political discussions with peers given that the engagement in political actions is driven by the desire to adhere to social norms. Agreeableness indicates the tendency to be kind, considerate, likeable, cooperative, and helpful (Graziano & Eisenberg, 1997), and it is the personality factor that is most associated with motives to maintain positive interpersonal relations (Digman, 1997; Graziano & Eisenberg, 1997; Jensen-Campbell et al., 2002). Social conformity represents an opportunity to adapt one's own behavior to a group standard with the aim of gaining social approval of others and to establish satisfying relationships (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004); therefore, agreeable

people should be especially prone to modify their political behavior in accordance with the perceived norms in their social group. For example, Devaraj, Easley, and Crant (2008) found that Agreeableness moderates the relationship between subjective norms related to the use of new information technologies and people's intention to use the technology, suggesting that agreeable people are more sensitive to others' behaviors. According to this view, we expected political talk to enhance political participation only when people perceive that their peers are highly involved in politics (social influence). This effect should be especially pronounced for people with high level of Agreeableness (Hp2).

2. Data and method

We relied on longitudinal survey data gained in Sweden on a sample of young adults living in Örebro, a city of about 130,000 inhabitants which is similar to the country as a whole with regard to its immigration rate, income level, and unemployment rate. The first data collection took place between November 2010 and February 2011, the second one took place between November 2012 and February 2013. The target sample ($N = 2000$) was randomly extracted from Örebro population of 22- and 26-years old. Respondents have been surveyed twice, at two year interval. In both waves, the questionnaire was mailed to the target sample, together with a personalized link to the online version of the questionnaire. Participants received a 28 € gift card for their participation. In the first assessment, 1140 youths completed the questionnaire, while 1175 youths completed the questionnaire in the second assessment. We selected only people who participated in both waves ($N = 895$, 60.3% women, mean age at $T_1 = 24.21$, $SD = 2.90$). Given the purpose of the study we used all the variables as measured at T_1 , with the exception of political participation for which we used information gathered at both time points. The use of longitudinal data allowed us to adequately model the effects of political talk on political engagement over time. That is, we have been able to control for previous level of political engagement as it is possible that politically active youths were initially more likely to discuss politics with their friends.

To test whether participants with responses at both time points ($N = 895$, coded 1) differed from those who participated only the first time ($N = 245$, coded 0), a logistic regression analysis was performed with all study variables included as independent variables. Significant differences were found only for gender (Wald = 14.52, $p < 0.001$). In general, low Nagelkerke R^2 (.04) indicated that the differences between those who participated in both the assessments and those who responded only to the first one were not substantial.

3. Measures

3.1. Main variables of interest

3.1.1. Political participation

At both time points, participants were asked whether, in the last year, they have been engaged never (1), occasionally (2), or several times (3) in nine different political activities (e.g., signed a petition, contacted a politician or public official). Based on Cronbach's α s of 0.66 at T_1 and 0.75 at T_2 , we computed two mean indexes of political participation.¹

3.1.2. Political talk

Based on previous studies (e.g., Ekström & Östman, 2013), respondents were asked how often they talked with their best friends about politics or societal issues, and how often they talked about what they heard on the news about what is happening in Sweden and around

¹ Given the low reliability coefficients, we checked whether the items tapped a single dimension of political participation. Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis (WLSMV estimator) showed that a one-dimension solution fits the data well both at T_1 and T_2 (CFI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.05 at T_1 ; CFI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.04 at T_2).

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